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Brisbane Australia

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Tindle, Elizabeth](#) (2007) Motivation : staying in the achievement zone with personal integrity. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, Oct, pp. 27-34.

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/49644/>

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Motivation: Staying in the Achievement Zone with personal Integrity.

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This lecture was presented to outstanding Business students in the “Corporate Partners in Excellence Programme”, between 2001 and 2005. Each year had a theme quotation.

2001 "It was the best of times: it was the worst of times"

Charles Dickens, A tale of two cities. Chapter 1.

2002 “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” William Shakespeare, Hamlet
Act I, Scene 5, Marcellus

2003 “Leave a footprint in the sands of time” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

2004 “Education is the lighting of a fire not the filling of a pail”. William Butler
Yeats.

2005 “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Corporate Partners in Excellence Programme has been in operation since 2001. In the intervening years many outstanding Business students have benefited from this initiative and once again a selection of outstanding school achievers has an opportunity to continue their learning at Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Business.

This paper discusses some of the strategies for continuing as high performing students in University studies whilst at the same time maturing into successful, highly ethical professionals with a well developed social and environmental conscience.

The five quotations appearing at the start of the paper represent the theme for each of the five years that the CPIE Programme has been running. A brief introduction to these may be in order at this juncture. In the 2001 quotation, Charles Dickens in “A Tale of Two Cities” was referring to the period prior to the French Revolution - the London of pea soup fogs, of the hordes of starving, miserable people, and of the

obscene wealth, opulence and power amongst the aristocracy. We are reminded of the tale of Marie Antoinette who, when told that the French people were rioting because they had no bread, is reported to have said "Let them eat cake!"

Some believe that in today's world we have similar disparity between the rich and poor: the 10% super wealthy (CEOs in USA are reported to earn over 400 times the salary of a blue collar worker) and the impoverished, sick and displaced, and that we are on the brink of a paradigm shift. This paradigm shift, it is thought, will be from a free market economy to democratic globalization where world capitalism will be under democratic rules to protect families, workers and the environment.

The 2002 quotation of William Shakespeare, could be said of the ENRON collapse (and many others of similar ilk), the largest bankruptcy in American history. This has been described as being the result of "Crony capitalism" which had its fulcrum in Texas and its feelers spread to 3000 subsidiaries throughout the world (offshore companies). We are now finding that their network included powerful people in the legal system, in auditing, in politics, credit rating agencies and in banks. There was little disclosure to the outside world of what was going on. This was a new capitalism without regulation or borders (deregulated!); a "weightless" economy based on paper, for example, derivative trading. The woman Vice President of the company, who predicted its "implosion", described it as "an elaborate accounting hoax" and added "We're such a crooked company". Shortly afterwards, the truth was out. The top people saved themselves and their millions of dollars, and the employees and investors were the losers. It was a fine example of the advice that American business believed in "Get in, get rich and get out".

It is important to put ourselves into a world context when examining our career choices, our life plans, personal goals and achievement. We in Australia are fortunate people. Not only do we have our basic biological needs met each day by our family or

our government, but we also have amazing opportunities for personal development through higher education and career advancement.

The young people in this seminar today are on the cusp of a personal journey which has the potential to take them into the most influential, powerful and rewarding positions in international institutions. They have the potential for world leadership and policy making that may have resounding implications throughout the world just as the ENRON, Worldcom and HIH executive officers had. These young achievers could join the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations, World Trade Organisation, Citibank and other influential organisations. This is true achievement. However, ethical high achievement does not "just happen" automatically. We can choose to leave a footprint of integrity, in the sands of time (2003 quotation) and speak out about injustice, fraud, corruption, inappropriate behaviour, discrimination, greed and avarice (2005 quotation).

This paper will address issues of maintaining the high achievement that participants in this programme have already demonstrated in their respective schools. It will examine strategies for staying in the zone of optimum performance without the emotional pain of stress, anxiety, anger and depression to which many business people, managers and executives succumb.

The paper will also focus on the importance of staying in the achievement zone whilst being true to one's own personal moral and ethical code. The aim, I believe is to become part of and contribute to, a 'moral economy' and retain a social and environmental conscience. Business and personal ethics go beyond the law. A good check when faced with a moral dilemma, is to ask "How would it play on 'Sixty Minutes'?"

I am not an economist, however, I have the sense to know that most resources on the planet earth are finite; that a 100 year old tree translates into hard cash only once and then it is gone forever; that the resources the world sometimes undervalues, such as air, water, topsoil, wildlife and ecological balance, need high priority in economic machinations. A natural phenomenon can be raped but once and the rapist takes all. I believe that we are animals that fit into the natural scheme of things just like the baboons, pandas, tigers and the thousands of endangered species that share earth with us. Economics starts with a true love of and a respect for the natural world we live in. That is, environmental ethics.

When/if the young people here today ever get into positions of influence or power, I would like to think that they will remember their connection with "the created". We human beings are made from the same chemistry as the universe. A rearrangement of molecules results in a different organism whether that be a strawberry or a human being. We share the same genetic code as mice (with a few extra genes). We need to respect our biological link in the concrete jungle of inner city life. In Wall Street, I imagine, it must be easy to ignore natural and man-made environmental calamities on this planet, such as the oil spills in the Galapagos Islands and on the Great Barrier Reef of Australia or the death of the Aral Sea in Asia described as the greatest man-made environmental disaster in the world.

On the more micro level, I can tell you of one of many clients who visited the university counselling service. This young man reported that he was suffering from constant headaches and was unable to sleep. He spoke at great speed, the words tumbling out as if he were in a race to finish. He was stressed from his work. This client said that he worked seventy two hours a week, claimed that he was very good at what he did and was very highly paid. He had no time for socialising, exercising, eating sensibly or caring for his health. He was ignoring most of his basic human needs, believing that he would stop working in this way when he had earned enough

money and that financial wealth would compensate for everything he was giving up now (following the old adage, “He who dies with the most toys wins!”). His priorities had been skewed. He had lost touch with the richness of living and in his hard driving, time conscious, “A” type behaviour, his health was suffering. He was not a happy vegemite.

There is a danger when we are high achievers, to continue pushing ourselves relentlessly, without giving ourselves regular permission to have time out for fun and leisure. High achievers also develop a loathing and fear of not performing at a high level. Sometimes they avoid activities in which they might have a low performance and may not take the risks of trying new ventures. They have to learn to ignore the taunts of perfectionistic tendencies which might stultify their versatility by denying them an opportunity to have a go and risk "failing".

How then can school high achievers stay in that zone of optimum or peak performance? How can they stay in the 'achievement zone' which feels so good?

The zone of peak performance is defined as the "ideal psychological and physical state commensurate with a level of optimum attainment for a particular individual". Murphy (1999) refers to it as the "achievement zone".

Beginning a university degree can be compared with climbing a mountain. The natural outcrop, I frequently use as my example, is "Totem Pole", a natural pinnacle emerging from the ocean off the coast of Tasmania. Many climbers attempt to climb this vertical outcrop; this needle. No one is making them do it. They have a strong desire to get to the top but in the process, enjoy the challenge that each foothold or handhold brings as each has to be puzzled over and solved. The project demands specific personality characteristics for success, including determination, tenacity, strength, dedication to the task, enthusiasm, energy and an ability to keep the goal in

sight, figuratively. All of these factors can be said of progressing through a university degree. Climbers would not dream of attempting their climb alone. They have a buddy with whom they cooperate and with whom they provide mutual support. Similarly, going through university can be a lonely process for some students. One minor study carried out at QUT, on 197 Information Technology and Science students, suggested that in the first semester, "stressed, pessimistic" and alienated or socially unconnected students gained higher marks. However, most studies suggest the opposite to this. Enjoying and being interested in the task, contributes to high motivation and a successful performance.

For staying in the achievement zone, students need to be well organised. Preparing a personal peak performance programme (PPPP) at the start of semester will help. This involves deciding on personal goals and setting priorities. The goals need to be realistic for the student (and not necessarily for parents), and would identify personal resources needed to achieve them. Accurate measurement of progress and accomplishment with dates, times and amounts can be monitored and recorded. Rewards need to be built into the programme as small chunks of the goals are reached. Concentration is best placed on process rather than outcome goals (the climb rather than the peak) so that there is personal satisfaction during study and not just when the degree certificate is attained. Life is not put on 'hold' whilst one obtains a degree: it is lived today.

The student needs to plan and consistently work from, a semester programme, a weekly programme and a daily programme. This is not only a management of time but a management of self. The daily programme has to be prepared at least the evening before the day to which it refers. If students have the ability to get each day right, everything else is more likely to fall into place. Worry about the future is less likely to impact on the present. Similarly, resentment about the pain or mistakes of the past is less likely to intrude. Behavioural strategies of "mastery and pleasure" can

be used each day to help keep the student focussed, increase energy and retain balance in their lives. Mastery is what must be done and pleasure is what one would like to do. It is similar to time -on -task and time -off-task. The "pleasure" component can be physical exercise, participation in a team sport or dancing. Physical activity taps into the body's natural 'happy drug', its beta-endorphins, raises affect, and sets the stage for productivity and alertness. The mastery and pleasure strategy deals with any tendency the student may have to feel fatigued and depressed. Students who can maintain an "iceberg" profile that is, a low score on depressed mood, anxiety, fatigue, chaotic state and anger and high score on vigour are likely to remain high performers. Positive efforts have to be made to maintain optimum health throughout the academic year by means of sensible, healthy eating, an enjoyable exercise programme and by taking steps to develop and retain a healthy sense of humour. Laughter can be very therapeutic and counteracts the tendency to take life too seriously. As Palmer (1994) argues, "to neglect self care is professionally negligent".

Personal and study networks need to be organised to ensure ample support throughout the semester. It is useful for the student to design a sociogramme of current social networks and to expand or contract it as necessary. Begin with "me" in the centre and record all friends, groups, clubs, and family members that form part of the individual's social and academic support network. Students sometimes find that their social network in the "real" world has shrunk whilst that in the virtual world has grown. Reflect on this.

Cognitive approaches to staying in the achievement zone are of equal importance as the behavioural strategies described. We can all teach ourselves to think positively Seligman (2005) and believe in ourselves. With self confidence, success is more likely. Self doubts and personal put-downs can be replaced with positive, affirmative thinking. Cognitive restructuring can be learned and practiced. An optimistic attitude offers more rewards in life than a pessimistic one. One student who measured very

high on pessimism, remarked that she always expected the worst so that when it happened she wasn't disappointed. Hers was a deliberate choice to be pessimistic. Others of us may have learned our pessimism from significant others in our lives. Pessimists worry more and tend to be less rewarding for others to be with. Change, however, is possible. Some tips for becoming more optimistic and positive are:

1. Decide to be more cheerful. Smile more. Look at people for a second or two longer than you would normally. Greet them when there is an opportunity.
2. Avoid being critical. Tolerate other people's faults and mistakes. Try allowing others to be right if you are usually in the habit of trying to prove them wrong. You don't have to be "The sergeant major of the world". Work on acceptance and being non-judgmental more than usual. Learn assertive rather than aggressive or passive behaviour.
3. Visualise previous or future good times and enjoyable experiences to alter a black mood. Imagining or visualising successful performances can contribute to creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.
4. Reduce the amount of complaining you do. Focus on the good things you have and the nice things that have happened to you. This raises affect and energy.
5. Pause, take a breath, think before acting and speaking impulsively. Avoid reacting or overreacting especially in anger. Never physically assault. Develop an ability to retain inner calmness whenever you wish, by using calming self talk.
6. Develop a resilience in the face of difficulties. Ignore what you can. Refuse to allow other people's inappropriate behaviour to colour your life. Take full

responsibility for your own thoughts, feelings and actions. Allow others to be responsible for theirs'.

7. Demonstrate that you value yourself and others.

8. When facing an ethical dilemma, ask yourself how it would play on the TV programme "Sixty minutes".

Should a student need help to master any of the above, an approach can be made to the counsellors on campus. The service is free and confidential.

In conclusion, this paper has identified "the zone of peak academic performance" or achievement zone, and strategies for staying in that achievement zone were suggested. The whole was placed in the context of the world that students will be entering when they have completed their degrees.

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